

The third-space professional: a reflective case study on maintaining relationships within a complex higher education institution

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Abstract

This paper showcases the work of Third Space professionals in a complex higher education (HE) setting, and specifically its impact on the building of trust relationships and innovative approaches. It makes use of a case-study methodological approach, reflecting on the experiences of various stakeholders within pilot phases. The findings reveal challenges related to maintaining trust relationships, which can be threatened by technicist approaches. The reflective case study explores an innovative live-streaming project and the related pedagogical approaches by Instructional Design experts, as Third Space professionals, who have carved out a critical space within a HE setting. This investigation, and its related lessons, highlights that learning-and-teaching aspects, training and support, reconciliation of trust relationships, can be applied to Third Space professionals in other HE institutions.

Introduction

Professional staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) are changing the nature of their work, as they continue to work across and outside specific boundaries. This is reflective of the emerging domain between academic and professional spheres, termed the *Third Space* (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 3). This study highlights that the Third Space professionals within HEIs are recognised as those individuals who operate within a support environment, which constitutes an important link between these two spheres. These blended professionals, engaged in work with fundamentals of both the 'professional and academic activity', are able to be more creative in less bounded settings (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 377). It is important that these academic institutions take advantage of the contributions that these staff members bring to current and future environments (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 396).

The Centre for Innovative Education and Communication Technologies (CIECT) team at UWC (University of the Western Cape), which constitutes Third Space professionals, have 'carved out a more critical space' (Szekeres, 2011) in the institution since it was first established in 2005. These professional roles entail more than dedicated training and support activities. They operate within the broader learning-and-teaching and research arenas by taking on a multitude of daily operational roles, including reflective practices, the application of innovative processes and engagement with important activities such as 'teaching students [and] institutional research and development' (Van Schalkwyk, Leibowitz, Herman, & Farmer, 2015, p. 13).

Literature related to the Third Space professional, emphasises the need for institutions to recognise the contributions of these professionals (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 396). This research will highlight, through a theoretical design, the complexity of maintaining relationships within this Third Space, especially in relation to technicist approaches that can threaten trust relationships.

The authors employ a case-study methodological approach. The next section will focus on a specific case study showing how the CIECT team has to operate between professional and academic activities (ThirdSpace), and more importantly how they need to work through challenges that can break collaborative initiatives and relationships. Furthermore, through this paper, the authors reflect on practices that impact the Third professional space, specifically emphasising that they are no longer the 'invisible workforce' (Rhoades, 2010).

Third space professionals: visibility and building relationships

This section deliberates on the case study through two broad phases, including specific pilots. Hence, the visibility of the Third Space professional is demonstrated within the authors' institutional context, and can be applied within other HEIs.

Phase 1: implementation of a digital lecture capturing web-based software

The institution (specifically, an infrastructural department), ventured to purchase a *Digital Lecture Capturing* web-based software. This innovative software can capture lectures (live video recordings), enabling students to revisit the learning material at any time. In addition, lecture material can be uploaded and viewed by the students in real-time across geographical domains.

The CIECT team was contacted by the Project Manager of the infrastructure department, for initial discussions in the conceptualisation phase (mid-2013) to engage in a first pilot. From the start of the initiative, the focus was not on the software itself. During these discussions, CIECT identified the pedagogical value for both students and lecturers as this was the main objective. Subsequently, CIECT had to identify relevant lecturers to engage in this pilot. Due to the recognition that CIECT had, over a period of almost a decade, built trust relationships with academics across faculties and other support units, it was selected as a key stake-holder in this process. The current relationship between CIECT and academics across faculties, is as Szekeres (2011, p. 689) describes, a 'cooperative community based on trust and respect for each other's' roles'. As discussed in this phase, the vendor would conduct functionality-related train-the-trainer workshops related to familiarisation, navigation and troubleshooting, with CIECT to roll-out the pilot initiative.

The 'visibility' of the CIECT team was built over a period of time as lecturers and students began to appreciate and acknowledge the consistent support provided to them. Moreover, the trust relationships increased as the lecturers became aware that the 'credentialed, professional' team members are there to assist them with projects (Szekeres, 2011). This leads to the creation of collaborative online environments, showcasing efforts of lecturers and the team, which are marketed via CIECT's blog site. Hence, the team is no longer the 'invisible workers' (Szekeres, 2011).

In 2014, the CIECT team proceeded to consult with, and identify, lecturers for the pilot phase of the project. Consultation processes with these lecturers has led to mindset changes related to the

specific software and its value. Furthermore, the commitment and dedication by all stakeholders to the pilot phase of the project is aligned to Bassnett (2005), who states that they need to work together to ensure that systems are functional and provide quality educational experiences. This situation is reflective of a complex HEI and CIECT's involvement from the start, and was a reminder that we cannot be mere 'machine bureaucrac[ies]' who purchase and implement technical equipment in an ad hoc manner (Smith & Hughey, 2006).

Phase 1: implementation and the importance of agency

During the pilot phase (2014), the CIECT Instructional Designers (IDs) as the Third Space professionals, having identified a specific pilot group (full-time undergraduate), consulted with the selected lecturer and related departmental head regarding the operational and logistical issues for the pilot. Based on this meeting, the IDs further had to set up a familiarisation session during the tutorial classes with the specific students and tutors in order to give a broad overview of the project objective. Following this confirmation, training sessions for lecturers and students were conducted by the IDs.

The lecturers were taught, making use of a scaffolded approach, how to use the software and apply it to a specific teaching event. In addition, the students were also taught on the use of the software in relation to retrieval and navigation. Furthermore, the IDs had to take cognisance of some 'mundane' administrative issues and act accordingly. This included contacting the relevant department administrator to obtain an updated class list from the institutional system.

This was followed by the IDs dedicating time with the Project Manager to assign the resources (tablets) to the students and lecturers. The IDs conducted training sessions for the students on the use of the device and the software. Students who attended these training sessions have reflected on the value of it and noted that those who were not able to attend could also benefit from the training. However, additional logistical management had to be conducted by the IDs. Not all students were present during the first resource allocation (tablets) and the ID members had to arrange with the departmental administrator to safeguard and distribute the remaining devices. Moreover, it was found that some of the students were not captured accurately on the class list, requiring further follow-up by the IDs.

The IDs created a plan of action in order to adequately test the functionalities of this software. Lectures were recorded making use of the software and streamed live during class time. Whilst the lecture was streamed, it should be noted that a third of the class and the IDs (according to the plan of action) viewed the lecture from different geographical locations. During these live lectures students and IDs shared their viewing experiences in real time via the software and further documented it. It should be noted that the lecturers also commented on their learning-and-teaching experiences. At the conclusion of the above pilot, it was also necessary for the Project Manager to keep track of and collect the resources. However, in this case this was a role fulfilled by the IDs.

Phase 1: implementation and building trust relationships

Following this pilot group, based on existing trust relationships, the IDs identified a second pilot group who could benefit from this software tool. This part-time after-hours lecture was streamed

from UWC to a satellite campus in the Southern Cape region. After the delivery of this lecture, both students and lecturer shared their experiences. One of these students made the following comment:

Please ask students to familiarise themselves with the tablets and to log into zoom before the class at least. I had to explain to two people what to do and I think they were accessing the platform for the first time.

The IDs become important agents between the lecturer and the student. For example, students contacted the IDs directly regarding teaching and technical issues, such as ‘...sound is poor’, ‘picture very pixelated and text on board very small’ and ‘It can work and these are just teething issues’. In certain facets of this project the IDs, as mentioned, had to fill the role of the Project Manager. This correlates with the concept of ‘secret managers’ (kehr, 2006, p. 170).

Both pilot groups (students and lecturers) observed the specific pedagogical benefits of this project. From the students’ perspective, they were able to reinforce their learning by viewing these recorded lectures numerous times at their own pace for assessment purposes. It also allowed students who could not attend these classes to view the lectures on demand. For example, a student remarked the following: ‘I think this is a great idea’. Moreover, the lecturers were able to reduce the administration process related to ‘constant liaison’. The use of the software made it possible for lecturers to avoid travelling to the satellite campus twice a week to repeat lectures. Thus, lecturers agreed to engage in a second-phase pilot.

Phase 2: paving the learning pathway

At the beginning of 2015 (January), CIECT contacted the software vendor and the infrastructure department Project Manager to discuss Phase Two of the Digital lecture Capture project. A meeting was held between CIECT and the vendor in order to address the challenges experienced during the first pilot. The discussion further entailed the integration of the software and ikamva (institutional learning management system) for student access.

Subsequent to the discussion, two training workshops (3-hour sessions) were conducted for the IDs by the vendor regarding updated functionalities. Furthermore, the Project Manager requested that the IDs continue with their selection and engagement with the relevant participants.

Based on the experiences of the first phase of this pilot, the way forward was mapped for the second pilot phase, 2015. The lecturers who had ‘live streamed’ to their students remotely within the Western Cape (during the second semester, 2014, pilot phase) were informed of the second phase of the pilot. This formed part of the project objectives as stated by the infrastructure department and documented within institutional senate meetings. Accordingly, the lecturers prepared themselves for this engagement during the second semester, 2015.

Phase 2: technicist approach challenges pedagogical approach

Unfortunately, during this upward trajectory of the pilot project, the infrastructure department brought the project to an abrupt halt (i.e. did not provide access to the software), without

informing and consulting with CIECT. After numerous appeals to the infrastructure department Project Manager, CIECT was informed that they were waiting on communication by the departmental head. A delayed follow-up by the end of the first semester revealed a technician approach by the head without thorough explanation. This approach focused on operational issues, as Whitchurch (2010, p. 12) states, 'associated with process and bureaucracy', ignoring the IDs continuous efforts to build and manage the expectations of the lecturers. Furthermore, these efforts were not merely aligned to project start and end dates, but were rather to the objective of making use of the software to support diverse groups of students across geographical boundaries. This technician approach failed to address the important aspects related to the building of relationships between CIECT and the selected lecturers. CIECTs 'open-ended' approach as discussed entails processes of conceptualisation, design, delivery and implementation (Whitchurch, 2010, p. 12). The IDs, dedicated to CIECT projects, fulfil both project management and academic roles, indicative of the Third Space professionals.

Based on the management of the selected group, the IDs investigated alternative eTools, such as narrated PowerPoint and Google Hangouts, which were tested prior to the start of the second semester lectures. However, these alternate eTools had limitations, as it could not record the live stream lecture and allow students to view recorded lectures. Although the IDs highlighted the pedagogical affordances, the lecturers in their capacity discerned not to make use of the alternative eTools due to constraints such as time management and additional workload:

I did the one PP narrated lecture and thanks to your instructions it was very easy and successful - but I just do not have the time to redo lectures. Also, when it is done this way, one has to adapt the lecture to include explanations which would normally be shown on a white board - and that just simply takes up too much time – it's like re-inventing the lecture from scratch.

Ultimately, CIECT had to get members to manually video-record the lectures (three evenings per week for the second semester), edit the footage and courier it to the students at the satellite campus. The lecture capturing software had successfully collated these processes during Pilot Phase 1, and the lecturers did not have to travel to the satellite campus (on a weekly basis) to deliver the face-to-face module. CIECT still had to meet the expectations of the lecturers and students in order to maintain the project momentum. Hence, the current engagements and processes do not merely focus on discussions related to project contractual times, rather demonstrates the more open-ended nature of our work as Third Space professionals in relation to the creation of blended learning environments.

Maintenance of the third space relationships

These processes are evident of a team which has to reflect on the challenges related to working across the academic and project management spheres as professionals (Whitchurch, 2010, p. 12).

This sudden lack of understanding by the infrastructure department is in contrast to their understanding at the conceptualisation of the project. Hence, this situation is, as Johnston and Richardson (2012, p. 115, citing Mitchell, 1995) states, indicative of a culture of 'complex intersections' within an institution which consists of multiple support units and departments, including 'multiple subject positions'.

As part of CIECT's effort to continuously maintain sound relationships with stakeholders across the campus community, and including technical departments, a meeting was set up by CIECT to engage with issues related to the infrastructure which impacted the entire project. During this meeting, the infrastructure departmental head maintained his technicist approach. He stated that they were unaware of expectations set regarding the second pilot phase, despite the continuous planning and discussions related to the roll-out of the second phase, and stated dates within the senate documentation. Thus, the infrastructure department leadership became 'tourists' within this project, and therefore the 'speed ... and timescales' of the infrastructure department are different to the 'rhythms' of the academic calendar followed by the CIECT team, in order to achieve the agreed outcomes (Whitchurch, 2010, p. 12).

After CIECT emphasised the impact of the decision to stop the project, the infrastructure department revived the project to continue within the fourth term of 2015. In light of the above meeting, the instruction to bring the lecturers on board again belies the complexity of the required reconciliation process. This relates to feedback which can facilitate an understanding of the developments and challenges of the pilot project, across the 'different spheres of activity' (in this case the various stakeholders, including the students) (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2015, p. 13).

As argued by Hicks (2005, p. 177), 'linguistic exchanges' can reveal '[p]articular discourses [which] define meaning, normalise practices, limit understandings and support power structures'. For example, a comment made by the infrastructure department head is once again reflective of a technicist approach during a time when the CIECT team had to negotiate differences as part of a process of reconciliation, which was necessary for 'new forms of activity to occur' ultimately facilitating understanding with stakeholders (Whitchurch, 2010, p. 14):

[t]he setup procedure itself however, is quite simple and straight forward, and the goal is for lecturers to embrace the solution ... (as they would other digital aids - e.g. a data projector).

This comment by the departmental head reveals the assumed simplicity of the functionalities of resources. However, the IDs have observed through the comment below, that the following is necessary for meaningful engagement throughout a project's lifespan, in alignment with the work of Salmon (2000) on familiarisation and socialisation:

Granting of user access, navigating the online platform, setting up the live streaming event, setting up of camera and tripod, linking the audio visual and tracking device to the camera equipment and lecturer.

The infrastructure department leadership, which had not been part of the extensive training prior to the implementation, implies that these functionalities are simple and user-friendly. As Whitchurch (2010, p. 13) states, '[t]o be able to question assumptions and improve decision-making, you have to be in the room as the decisions are being made'.

Engaging in a re-building process will involve re-emphasising the visibility of CIECT as a team, which has engraved a more significant space in the institution, and not just as professionals who are seen by academics to behave as ‘traffic wardens’ (in this case, abruptly stopping projects mid-way, and then proceeding when requested to do so) (Szekeres, 2011, p. 14).

Findings in relation to resistance and usefulness of technologies

This case study reveals findings which corroborate earlier work by the authors, highlighting the concept of resistance to elearning adoption in a higher education institution. This relates to: coordinating various support activities; equipping the support team with relevant skills to support lecturers and students; and increasing awareness around lecturers’ perceptions and confidence towards adopting educational technologies at a specific time (Stoltenkamp, Kies, & Njenga, 2007).

In other research (Stoltenkamp & Siebrits, 2015), the authors reflected on the importance of mindset changes to overcome resistance or reluctance among lecturers to adopt learning technologies. These are addressed through the continuous drive of effective use of educational technologies; the application of eTools within specific disciplines over a continuum of time; related reiterative processes and approaches to areas of learning-and-teaching, research, community engagement and collaboration reflected through a systemic, non-linear framework.

Furthermore, these studies are aligned to recent work which still highlights that institutional resistance ‘is not unique to higher education, [but] it is especially prevalent in social systems such as universities which structurally are resistant to change’ (Bryant, Coombs, & Pazio, 2014, p. 1). Moreover, Bryant et al. (2014, p. 8) emphasise resistance, not in terms of technology and sharing of content, rather to aspects arising ‘from staff performance management, time poverty and aversion to risk’.

As in this case study, Watermeyer (2015, p. 344) observes how the ‘third space of academia’ has to deal with individuals resistant to change and innovation to support their academic practices. Pham (2016, p. 17) further emphasises resistance in relation to a focus on examination results rather than the ‘reform of teaching and learning practices’.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate CIECT members as Third Space professionals who operate in areas ‘from which they might otherwise [have been] excluded’ (Van Schalkwyk, 2015, p. 14). Furthermore, this illustrates the fact that the Third Space is unlikely to occur simply by institutions ‘designing it in’, and that it depends on the combined initiative of individuals and institutions (Whitchurch, 2010, p. 20).

At the time of writing this paper, CIECT remains in the process of rebuilding trust relationships with those who have engaged in this project. This is further augmented by Whitchurch (2010, p. 21) who argues that ‘relationships rather than structures are at the heart of the way that Third Space works for individuals and institutions’ as is evident through this case study.

Although the lecturer (part-time-streaming satellite campus) indicated willingness to engage in a continuation of the project in the fourth term (2015), the head of the unit within the faculty had opted to rather employ a lecturer to conduct classes at the satellite campus. In addition, further attempts from the IDs to arrange the manual capturing and editing of the video footage, proved to be a logistical challenge. Therefore, as Whitchurch (2010, p. 13) summarises, ‘contributions [of Third Space professionals] are not always recognised and respected, or only after a lengthy period of building ... trust’.

It should be noted that positive engagements still exist between the CIECT team and lecturers in other areas of emerging technologies. However, this specific Digital lecture Capturing project was intended as a pivotal step towards the creation of a blueprint for further roll-out across faculties. Hence, trust relationships built by Third Space professionals can easily be undermined in relation to the difficulty of maintaining relationships in complex HEIs.

In future, research related to the Third Space professional will be aligned to the key concept of power blocs in academia otherwise, as Kincheloe (2008, p. 99) warns, ‘[e]ducators and other cultural workers who are unaware of this socio-political dynamic will be perpetually limited in their efforts to understand, provide for, and facilitate the empowerment of their subjugated students and clients’.

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